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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Statement submitted by Christian Children's Fund and International Rescue Committee, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has expressed to the international community that there is a "massive" culture of neglect and denial about violence against women and girls. He has stated that "refugee populations are in the front line of those difficulties"[i] and that there needs to be more equality between men and women. "The key question, at the level of the UN system, at the level of an organization, at the level of the refugee camp, is the empowerment of women, and that must be one of the central objectives of a modern, democratic system and a tolerant society."[ii] In order to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, the protection needs of refugee and internally displaced women and girls must be addressed.

Internally displaced and refugee women and girls are often at greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence, persecution, social exclusion, detention, extreme poverty, forced return, and other life-threatening situations and violations.[iii]

> "The experiences of women and girls during flight, in exile and post-conflict are significantly different from those of men. Displaced women and girls hold their families together under the most difficult and inhumane circumstances and do so while at increased risk to their safety and well-being — risks that include rape, beatings, torture, hunger and abandonment."[iv]

> "The danger is the same, near or far, but there's no wood nearby. When we are there getting the wood, local people sometimes take the girls' clothes off and do bad things. At the place where we get the firewood they tell us, 'Line up one by one.' They say, 'Stand two by two,' and they take us off like that and then they rape us. Sometimes this happens until evenings. We have told the police, but the police say 'Stay in your tent and nothing will happen.'" – The Women's Commission interview with refugee girls, Mille camp, Chad, January 16, 2005.[v]

Internally displaced and refugee girls, because of their age, developmental stage, and maturity, are at increased risk for abuse, exploitation, coercion and manipulation. Girls are more vulnerable than boys to mistreatment and to recruitment by traffickers and armed factions. Girls sometimes lack the assertiveness required to stand up for themselves and say "no" to risky or dangerous situations. They may see older men as protectors and providers, without understanding the risks involved, and may then be susceptible to transactional sexual relationships – sex in exchange for food or other assistance. Girls may lack understanding and education on sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, and be burdened with overwhelming responsibilities, such as: caring for siblings, sometimes heading their family; performing multiple domestic tasks, for their own or other families. Girls may thus be unable to attend school or participate in normal developmental activities that help mitigate vulnerability to risk.[vi]

Girls are sometimes recruited, often through abduction, into armed forces while in displacement situations. In many instances, girls in combat zones are sexually abused, leading to high incidences of

sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and unsafe abortions. Yet no medical assistance available to them. Even in post-conflict or disaster settings, separated girls continue to face greater instances of gender-based violence, discrimination, and social marginalization. Many older displaced girls are mothers, desperately trying to support their children. These young mothers lack the right to own land, which is necessary in order to achieve food security and to elevate their social status within the community. Out of destitution, many displaced girls may be drawn into dangerous forms of labor, including commercial sex work. [vii]

Access to education and health care is particularly difficult for children, particularly girls, who are internally displaced or refugees in other countries. Displaced children often cite the importance of education for developing critical skills needed to earn income for survival and building their own future. Lack of education is one of the many effects of displacement, having long-term consequences for the future of children, as well as their countries. Opportunities to pursue education beyond the primary school level are often severely limited. For many, the fear of attacks or abduction is sufficiently severe to prevent children, particularly girls, from attending schools. In other instances, decades of prolonged war have destroyed schools, entire educational infrastructures, and health facilities. For the millions of children living in conflict settings, access to any formal or informal education is often unavailable.[viii] At times, even when educational services are available, schools do not provide a safe space for girls. Throughout almost all contexts of conflict and displacement, girls face sexual harassment and abuse in the classroom, from teachers and male students, as well as when walking to and from the generally distant schools.

In addition to the above mentioned risks faced by refugee and internally displaced women and girls, those with physical and mental disabilities, are particularly vulnerable to abuse and sexual exploitation, as they may lack the mental or physical capacity to resist physical violence and sexual advances. They may be targeted by men and youth because they are deemed less able to protect themselves. Due to the social stigma that often surrounds their disability, these women and girls may also be less likely to be protected by community members. They may also be the last to receive food and other humanitarian assistance from family or other caretakers.[ix]

Conclusion

> "When people are forced to flee their homes and protection systems are not yet in place, sexual violence poses a life-threatening risk to the health and well-being of women and girls. The long and short term consequences of sexual violence, which includes rape, sexual abuse and exploitation, can affect all aspects of women's and girls' physical, psychological and social health and well-being. These consequences not only affect the individual women, but also negatively impact her family and the larger community."[x]

In order to truly protect refugee and internally displaced women and girls from violence and exploitation, the international community must come together and implement the following recommendations:

Recommendations[xi]

- Full implementation of the IASC Guidelines for Prevention of Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, in order to immediately ensure the protection of women and girls, as well as the creation of a specific mechanism to ensure accountability for the guidelines.
- Establish Codes of Conduct for humanitarian and security personnel, and recruit and deploy female staff in all agencies providing assistance.
- Adequate financial resources made available to ensure women and girls are protected.
- Involve the community in risk identification, prevention and intervention, as a means of reducing the protection risks faced by displaced women and girls. And, include host communities in refugee and IDP assistance and services to mitigate discrimination, resentment and the targeting of the displaced for criminal activities.
- Involve women and girls in their own protection strategies. Communities, including men, must be similarly engaged in the protection of women and girls.
- Support community-based responses with additional interventions, such as the provision of security personnel and the presence of female staff.
- Ensure that camp layout and the placement of water points and essential services enhance protection and safe access, including the safe provision of firewood and/or fuel alternatives.
- Ensure equal access for women and girls to health care, education, training programs and income generation activities. Livelihoods render women and girls less vulnerable to exploitation and provide the income necessary for payment of school fees.
- Strengthen local capacities for child protection and increase access to safe educational programs (formal, informal, vocational, and literacy programs), psycho-social support, and safe and child-friendly spaces.
- Ensure appropriate, timely legal responses for serious crimes committed against women and girls.
- Implement demobilization and reintegration programs for ex-combatants that include women and girls who participated in any capacity.
- Provide economic opportunities for women and girls throughout the cycle of displacement so they are not forced to resort to negative coping strategies, such as transactional or commercial sex.
- Ensure sexual violence is a standard component of multi-sectoral emergency assessments and link humanitarian efforts with national development plans to ensure inclusion and integration of displaced and local populations.
- Provide robust responses to gender-based violence that include prevention activities, effective complaint mechanisms, and holistic, timely responses covering health, mental health, economic, social, security, and legal.

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[i] UNHCR News, "UNHCR chief condemns culture of neglect and denial about violence against women," November 24, 2006. http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/45670dcd4.html

[ii] UNHCR News, "UNHCR chief condemns culture of neglect and denial about violence against women," November 24, 2006. http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/45670dcd4.html

[iii] Women's Commission, "Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Identifying Risk Factors and Taking Steps to Prevent Abuse," 2006, 1.

[iv] Women's Commission, "Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Identifying Risk Factors and Taking Steps to Prevent Abuse," 2006, 1.

[v] Women's Commission, "Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Identifying Risk Factors and Taking Steps to Prevent Abuse," 2006, 2.

[vi] The Women's Commission, "Displaced Women and Girls At Risk: Risk Factors, Protection Solutions, and Resource Tools," February 2006, 4.

[vii] Christian Children's Fund, brief on "Displaced Children;" February 2006; 1.

[viii] Christian Children's Fund, brief on "Displaced Children;" February 2006; 1.

[ix] The Women's Commission, "Displaced Women and Girls At Risk: Risk Factors, Protection Solutions, and Resource Tools," February 2006, 5.

[x] The International Rescue Committee, "Emergency Response Initiative: Addressing Sexual Violence in Complex Emergencies," http://www.theirc.org/ERI-fact-sheet10-19-06.pdf

[xi] Women's Commission, "Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Identifying Risk Factors and Taking Steps to Prevent Abuse," 2006, 4; Christian Children's Fund, "Child Protection Assessment in Eastern Chad," August 2004, 14-15; and The International Rescue Committee, "Emergency Response Initiative: Addressing Sexual Violence in Complex Emergencies," http://www.theirc.org/ERI-fact-sheet10-19-06.pdf.